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Submission for paper presentation at:

APA, Div. 36, Riverside, CA, March 2018

Submitted: January 7, 2018

“Save Thyself, Child!” Did the Salvation Myths of World Religions Arise in Response to Corporal Punishment?

When psychological trauma occurs in childhood, symbolic repetitions of the trauma can emerge. For much of world history, severe childhood corporal punishment was endemic. If the result was widespread trauma, as is likely, could the symbolic response have been institutionalized? Might religion, the quintessentially symbolic activity, have been the vehicle? Might religion still function this way? In this talk, I argue that the answer to these questions is, “Yes.” Specifically, I argue (a) that Abrahamic and Karmic salvation myths arose from punishment-induced childhood mental schemas; (b) that these myths tended to promote faith and emotional engagement largely because they comport with the childhood schemas; and (c) that engaging with these myths can palliate and self-medicate anxiety and depression rooted in the punishments. To provide conceptual focus, I propose the Traumatogenic Theory of Religious Myth, and introduce a new descriptive terminology. Background at www.benjaminabelow.com